

Women of Europe

Editorial

The preparations for the Intergovernmental Conference of 1996, the World Conference on Women's Rights in Beijing, and the work of the Group of Commissioners on "Equal Opportunities for Men and Women and Women's Rights," hold a crowded and challenging agenda in store for the new term after the summer holidays. The various Community institutions are making arrangements and redoubling their efforts to examine the issues in-depth, chart their policy and prepare their negotiating positions.

True to the commitment undertaken by its President, Mr Jacques Santer, the European Commission is focusing on the problem of equal opportunities between men and women by searching for optimal ways to enshrine this issue in all Community policies. The Group of Commissioners on "Equal Opportunity" has already met twice, while the Interservice Group composed of representatives from all Directorates General has devised and set up an exacting procedure for preparing the Commissioner's guidelines so that appropriate proposals can be submitted promptly.

Many things will come to a head at the Intergovernmental Conference in 1996. Now and henceforth, the Reflection Group chaired by the Spanish Secretary of State for European Affairs, Mr Carlos Westendorp, is working on the main challenge for the years ahead, i.e. the enlargement of the European Union to include the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. Negotiations may prove difficult, however, as the Member States have different views on the right solutions.

Discussions are bound to be as lively at the United Nations World Conference on Women in Beijing, for which the Commission has just adopted a Communication reaffirming its leadership role for the promotion of women throughout the world. The importance of the Beijing meeting in September is further underscored by the attitude of the national parliaments which had been asked by the Committee on Women's Rights of the European Parliament to express their position at its meeting in May.

Many and indeed complex are the issues that lie ahead, but the summer holidays are here, and a brief respite is well deserved. Happy holidays to one and all.

Véronique Houdart-Blazy

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Head of Section - Information for Women

The Group of Commissioners on Equal Opportunity gets down to work

Created on the initiative of and chaired by the President of the European Commission, Mr Jacques Santer, the Group of Commissioners on "Equal opportunity for Men and Women and Women's Rights" has already met twice, on 3 March and 31 May. Whereas the first meeting was purely inaugural, the second outlined procedures. Open to all interested Commissioners, this Group has a permanent core composed of Pádraig Flynn (Employment and Social Affairs), Anita Gradin (Immigration and Judicial Matters) Monika Wulf-Mathies (Regional Policies) and Erkki Liikanen (Personnel).



Monika Wulf-Mathies
Commissioner responsible for
Regional Policies, Relations
with the Committee of Regions
and the Cohesion Fund, and
member of the Group of
Commissioners on "Equal
Opportunities."

In an effort to enshrine the issue of equal opportunities in all Community policies, the Commissioners have identified seven areas of action for the coming year. An Interservice Group comprising one DG in a leading capacity and several associated DGs, will be set up for each area and instructed to draw up a summary report on the state of affairs, attainments and new initiatives for their section.

These reports will focus on the seven identified areas, i.e. the Labour Market; Development of

Rural and Urban Areas; Education, Training and Culture; SMEs - Local Employment Initiatives; Individual Rights; External Relations; and Awareness-Information.

They will then be used to prepare a more general document to be eventually submitted to the Group of Commissioners in the autumn. This global report will assess the situation and consider actions for the future, and might thus be used for a draft Commission Communication to the Council and the Parliament for 8 March of next year.

In any event, the work of the Group of Commissioners is bound to lead to a more comprehensive scrutiny of the equality policies by the entire Board of Commissioners.

For its part, the Parliament, which is monitoring progress in this field, was pleased with the creation of the Group of Commissioners because, in its view, it will help integrate the equality dimension in all Community policies and activities.

"Particular attention must be given to equality between men and women. Democracy can settle for nothing less. The Parliament was not mistaken on this score," Jacques Santer declared before the European Parliament during the investiture session. "I heeded your argument during the hearings and want to solemnly assure you that I shall personally see to it that equality between men and women becomes a real driving force of the Commission's activities."

The Reflection Group looks into the Intergovernmental Conference 1996

The Reflection Group on the Intergovernmental Conference (IGC) 1996 was officially set up on 3 June of this year in the enchanting setting of Taormina, Sicily. Far from haphazardly, the date and place for establishing the Reflection Group were chosen deliberately to coincide with an important anniversary. On 1 and 3 June 1955, in Messina, not far from Taormina, Germany, the Benelux countries, France and Italy initiated the negotiations that would two years later lead to the signing of the Treaty of Rome and the creation of the European Economic Community.

Chaired by the Spanish Secretary of State for European Affairs, Mr Carlos Westendorp, and composed of representatives of the fifteen Member States, two Euro MPs (Elisabeth Guigou and Elmar Brok), and the responsible European Commission-

er, Mr Marcelino Oreja, this Group will submit a report to the heads of state and of government at their meeting in Madrid this coming December.

The Group will have met some fifteen times by then at pre-scheduled intervals to discuss the objectives of the Conference, institutional matters, European citizenship, external and security policy and the instruments of the Union (standards, resources, policies, new areas of activities).

From their inaugural meeting, the eighteen members of the Group have discussed the stakes of the IGC and have completed their chairman's first questionnaire concerning the operation of a Union enlarged to 27 or 30 members. Their first conclusion is that the main task of revising the Maastricht

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Treaty will be to ensure the viability of an enlarged Union.

Yet this consensus could not conceal the first signs of diverging opinions between the members of the Group along national lines on the topics at hand (the relative weight of the EU institutions, vote by unanimity, transparency, etc.). Whereas Manfred Scheich of Austria reiterated the importance of the social dimension, David Davis of Great Britain was against extending the qualified majority and any major disruption, while Michel Barnier of France stressed that Europe could not function beyond fifteen Members without real reform.



Elisabeth Guigou
Euro MP and the only woman in the Reflection Group on the Intergovernmental Conference

Things have changed since then. "A climate of uncertainty and scepticism has overcast the pursuit of European unification," Mr Klaus Hänsch, President of the European Parliament, stated with regret. In

his view, the Reflection Group's mandate is not specific enough compared to the objectives set at the 1955 Conference (i.e. to establish a United Europe, merge the national economies, create a common market and social policies).

For his part, the President of the European Commission, Mr Jacques Santer, stressed that the Community had succeeded in securing a "long period of peace and prosperity," and that "to let it fritter away would be a crime against ourselves."

The three represented institutions reiterated the object of the upcoming Intergovernmental Conference in a solemn declaration: "To define the objectives and characteristics of a European Union endowed with the institutions that will enable it to be stronger, more democratic and more efficient. The Union must be able to assume fully its rightful role in the world and to promote the values it calls to witness."

Bolstered by this inter-institutional document, Mr Westendorp's Group is now forging ahead with its task. The members of the group met on 13 and 14 June in Luxembourg to broach two main issues concerning the institutional system and the different institutions (composition, attributions, voting procedure, etc.).

Requests closer to the citizens

Efforts and declarations by different lobbies and policy agents are concurrently on the increase. The *EU Migrants' Forum* has asked the Reflection Group to taken into consideration "the opinions of the fifteen million residents of the European Union who are nationals of non-member countries" when revising the Maastricht Treaty. This Forum would like to see the migration policy treated at European level, and a new article prohibiting discrimination on the basis of race, colour, religion, national, social or ethnic origin, included in the amended Treaty. According to the Forum, nationals of non-member countries with five years of permanent residence in the Union should be entitled to European citizenship.

For their part, *European Networks of Associations and Trade Unions* have insisted on ringing alarm bells on the human and financial cost of situations of economic and social insecurity that are emerging in Europe, while denouncing national policies that reduce social spending and underscoring the need to rectify the logic of Economic and Monetary Union accordingly.

The *European Network of Associations Against Poverty and Social Exclusion* has in turn demanded that issues which it considers essential for European citizens such as employment, poverty and social exclusion, be included in the IGC agenda.

Another aspect of the preparations for 1996 was the event organised on 22 May by the *International Women's Commission of the European Movement* (CFIME/IWCEM) on the stakes of the revision of the Maastricht Treaty. Numerous informal exchanges between the special guests (Anita Gradin, European Commissioner; Fernand Herman, Euro MP; Eliane Vogel-Polski, expert of the Network: "Women in Decision-making," etc.) and the 93 women participants, led to four major demands: a Union closer to the citizens, balanced coordination between the economic, monetary and social policies, transparent and efficient institutions, and a strengthened Union.

These wishes were shared by the *Nordic Women's European Network*. During a seminar on

IGC held in May and devoted more specifically to the small Member States, the representatives of this network insisted on greater citizen participation in the Union process and greater transparency in the work of the Council of Ministers.

The women's dilemma is apparently absent from the discussions, at present, as noted with regret by the *European Women's Lobby* (EWL), for whom "the issue of equality is not at the heart of the IGC." To rectify the situation, the EWL has called on a group of experts on "Women and the Construction of Europe" to contribute to the IGC process and to identify areas requiring particular efforts to achieve equal opportunities in the 21st century.

For its part, the *European Women's Lobby* has reiterated its call for the principle of equality to be clearly defined and enshrined in the Treaty.

Other problems may well surface by then. The IGC timetable is still tentative, and nearly four out of five European citizens are not even aware that the Maastricht Treaty is up for revision... ●

European Parliament

A step towards equal opportunities

Report on the Fourth Programme for Equal Opportunities Adopted

The European Parliament adopted Hedy d'Ancona's report on the fourth programme for equal opportunities at its plenary session in Strasbourg on 14 June. This report calls for a mandatory evaluation procedure and sufficient financial means and resources for this programme.

The Euro MPs also underscored the active participation of women at all levels of the decision-making processes. They called for awareness campaigns to inform public opinion and suggested that nationals of non-member countries who are residents of the European Union should be included in the notion of "fully fledged citizenship."

Mrs Ancona explained that the third programme had regrettably failed to achieve its objectives and expressed satisfaction about the additional budget appropriations (+35%) for the subsequent programme. European Commissioner Padraig Flynn then announced that the fourth programme would be adopted in July by the Commission and perhaps by the end of the year by the Council.

A communication on equal opportunities in the use of the structural funds and a draft resolution on the place of women in decision-making processes would be drawn up soon, he added. ●

European Parliament Committee on Women's Rights

Representatives of the national Parliaments met their European counterparts at the meeting of the Committee on Women's Rights in May to which they had been invited to discuss the IGC 1996 and the Gröner report on the Beijing meeting (see Articles on IGC 96 and Beijing).

The members of Parliament regretted that NGOs were not able to meet with the official delegations. Supported by all the participants, Ms Nel Van Dijk, Chairperson of the Committee on Women's Rights, said she would ask the President of the Parliament, Mr Klaus Hänsch, to send a letter to the Presidency of the European Union expressing the Commission's support for the position of the NGOs and their need to be able to meet with government representatives.

The Euro MPs wanted the conference to broach the following priorities: guarantee the economic and social rights of women (Karen Hoetje Jensen, chairperson of the Danish conservative women); enshrine the right to equal opportunities in a constitution (Eleonora Katseli, chairperson of the Greek Parliament's committee on women's issues); recognise the right of women to self-determination of their own body (Franca Valenti, member of the Italian Parliament's committee on health and social affairs); and defend the right of women to education and training (Margarida Silva Pereira, member of the social democratic party in the European Parliament). ●

Beijing

Fourth United Nations World Conference on Women: the priorities of the European Union

On 1 June, the European Commission adopted a communication to the Council and to the Parliament on the Union's priorities for the fourth United Nations World Conference on Women, which will be held in Beijing from 4 to 15 September. This communication reflects the Commission's determination to assume its leadership role in the promotion of women throughout the world.

Geared to the principles and strategic objectives that could be used for a common Union position, this communication stresses one key point, namely the creation of a "new partnership" between the two sexes "entailing equal participation by women in the civil, political, economic, social and cultural life, to guarantee equality, development and peace in the world."

The communication consequently calls for the adoption of specific measures liable to ensure the equality of the sexes in all policy areas and to "introduce concrete improvements in the daily life of women throughout the world." This objective is all the more important for the European Union since, as the Commission has pointed out, the Community has "extensive, sound experience on improving the condition of women."

The Commission has further underscored that, in spite of some improvements, the situation remains alarming at the world level, and women continue to suffer from flagrant injustices nearly everywhere. According to the Commission, serious disparities in such fundamental areas as education, literacy, health and nourishment are further aggravated by the higher risk women run of receiving inadequate pay for their work, being unemployed, assuming sole responsibility for the children and being victims of violence. Women bear the burden of poverty in disproportionate measure, and find it more difficult to gain access to fundamental rights and freedoms.

For a fair and equal society

"A fair and equal society cannot be created if women do not take a full, equal part in the decision-making process in all areas," warns the Commission in outlining a series of principles:

One: "The rights of women and young girls are inalienable, indivisible and constitute an integral part of universal human rights," and "acts of violence against women are one of the most serious violations of human rights."

Two: "The fundamental role played by women in the social, economic and political processes must be duly recognised."

Three: "Women must be able to take part in decisions that concern them and not be constantly subjected to the decisions of others."

Four: "Economic independence is of vital importance in helping women to attain many objec-

tives," in particular to combat discrimination and to get more involved in the decision-making process."

Five: "The participation of women in the administration of power is a key factor in the fight to eliminate poverty."

Concrete actions needed

Bolstered by these principles, the Commission has come out in favour of a declaration listing needed actions such as strengthening the legislation on human rights, adopting stricter laws on sexual harassment and violence against women, and taking the equality of the sexes into account in all programmes and policies. Other steps required in the Commission's view include encouraging and accelerating the participation of women in the decision-making process, ensuring equal access to the labour market, and encouraging the recognition and proper evaluation of their skills and contributions to economic growth. The Commission has moreover called for the recognition of women "as fully fledged contributors" to the social security system and for "family responsibilities to be equally shared" between men and women. Other priorities concern access to health, education and training.

"The success of the action platform adopted in Beijing will require a serious political commitment from all persons concerned as well as the will to accept institutional changes and to reform the legal frameworks," the Commission acknowledges. An important obstacle to financial and political commitment must be overcome, not only the national level — since "prime responsibility must lie with the governments" — but also at the regional and international levels.

The Beijing Conference will consequently "be of major importance for women throughout the world," and will be followed closely by the non-governmental organisations concerned which, at

the request of the Chinese authorities, have agreed to hold their forum some fifty kilometres from Beijing from 30 August to 8 September. Said authorities did show a certain openness at a preparatory meeting in Beijing on 8 June, promising visas for all registered participants, transport, accommodation and communication facilities, and opportunities for NGOs to meet with official delegations.

This has not prevented European Members of Parliament to adopt Lissy Gröner's (PSE, D) report at the June session in Strasbourg by a vote of 289 for, 69 against and 21 abstentions. In this report, the Euro MPs reiterated their call for sufficient participation guarantees and a clear and firm declaration in favour of human rights and democracy that takes particular account of women. They also called for a series of measures: equal participation of women in decision-making bodies, education and vocational training opportunities, equal pay, adequate child minding arrangements and facilities to reconcile career and family life, maternity protection, appropriate women's rights to social security, proscription of violence, etc.

The Parliament has asked the EU Member States to appoint a majority of women in their delegations, and would like to examine the conclusions of the Beijing Conference at a follow-up conference.

北京

The cost of living in the capitals of Europe

The most expensive city in the European Union is Copenhagen; the least expensive Athens. A study published in May by Eurostat (the Statistical Office of the European Union) with Brussels as the reference (index = 100), shows that the Danish capital is the most expensive in Europe (index = 120), just ahead of its French (113), German and Austrian (111) counterparts, whereas the Greek and Portuguese capitals are the most affordable (80).

In a separate index that removes the distortion caused by the cost of housing, Copenhagen still tops the list, whereas London, where it is particu-

larly expensive to find a house or an apartment, is one of the least expensive capitals.

Copenhagen is still the most expensive in terms of health, transport and communications, but edged out by Helsinki for food, beverages, tobacco and household appliances, Paris for clothes and shoes, Stockholm for leisure activities and education. Conversely, food, drinks and cigarettes are particularly affordable in Madrid, clothes and shoes in London, housing and transport in Athens, washing machines and other household appliances in Lisbon. Furthermore, it is preferable, in terms of cost,

Eurostat

to be taken ill in Paris (index = 95) than in Copenhagen (index = 140) and to go to school or university in Dublin (78) rather than Stockholm (119).

"This brochure was prepared by Eurostat in reply to numerous requests for information on the relative cost of living in the capitals of Europe," explained Mr Yves-Thibault de Silguy, the European Commissioner responsible for Eurostat.

The Statistical Office stresses that this study is particularly valuable because 3000 products were compared, the figures are official, up-to-date and approved by the Member States. The only reservation is that the study does not cover the resident population but only the expenses of international civil servants and thus applies more to "expatriates with a relatively high purchasing power". ●

The rights of women migrants and asylum seekers

The communication on the immigration and asylum policies adopted by the European Commission in 1994, has received the support of the Committee on women's rights, albeit with certain reservations on the part of MPs. "When dealing with immigration and asylum, violence against women should be considered as a separate, special category, on equal footing with political persecution, rather than simply designating women as a "vulnerable group," the MPs in attendance affirmed.

According to the Committee on women's rights, violence against women should be recognised as a reason for granting asylum in the Member States, and women should, of their own right, be entitled to the status of refugee or migrant for family reunification purposes.

Another problem is that of spouses of migrants in case of death or divorce, who most often find themselves without legal status and consequently are not entitled to residence and work permits or access to certain benefits and services. In the view of the MPs, this situation is a source of domestic violence that could be improved through special programmes, appropriate assistance and care centres.

"All immigration monitoring bodies in the Union must pay particular attention to the position of women in the migrant community," the Committee concluded.

Specific problem of women migrants

Though devoted to all aspects of immigration, the communication of the European Commission turned repeatedly to the specific problem of women migrants. Deploing a "tendency in several countries to restrict the conditions of family reunion," the European Commission has reaffirmed that family reunion is intrinsically linked to the "right to lead a family life as recognised by the European Convention on Human Rights."

The Commission has cautioned that "family reunion is of considerable importance for nationals of non-member countries who are legal residents of the European Union, and the success of integration policies may depend on family reunion policies." It is therefore in favour of a legally binding instrument such

as a convention capable of "providing a more solid basis and of tackling differences," in particular waiting periods, maximum age of the children involved, policies geared to the second generation, the admission of unmarried partners, relatives in the second degree and adopted children.

To improve the situation of nationals residing legally in the European Union, the Commission wants to see changes in the status of family members of legal migrants, who continue to fall under

the status of migrant "even after a long period of residence."

In the Commission's view, children and grandchildren of migrants, who have not acquired the nationality of the Member State in which they live, but have resided in that country for a specified period, should enjoy greater security after the age of compulsory school attendance.

Foreign-born spouses of migrants established in the country should be granted an independent right of residence after a specified period, so that they can stay in the country if their spouse leaves or dies, or if they get divorced.

A more general challenge for the Commission is to harmonise the legal status of nationals of non-member countries residing legally in the Union and to guarantee a right of permanent residence to migrants and to members of their families who meet "stability criteria."

As to reception on humanitarian grounds, the communication proposes assessing the extent to which established practices in the Member States authorise the admission of vulnerable groups and suggests that particular attention should be focused on the situation of women who are "victims of sexual harassment and prostitution rings."

For a more humanitarian approach

Since virtually all the Member States are immigration countries nowadays, the Commission thinks that a more in-depth approach to integration policies is indispensable. It suggests that migrants should be provided with sufficient means and resources (proficiency in the language of the country, housing, education, vocational training, etc.), that nationals of non-member countries should be authorised to travel freely in the Union with their residence permit, and that free movement be ensured for economic reasons. All these measures should be taken to combat discrimination, racism and xenophobia.

The Commission has nonetheless insisted that every immigration and asylum policy must also endeavour to limit the migratory pressure and to control the flows of migrants. This aspect requires accurate information, creating a migration monitoring body, tackling the deep causes of migratory pressure, harmonising the definition of refugee and setting minimum standards for asylum procedures. The Commission however warns that these measures may be weakened by different forms of illegal immigration, which "thwart the effects of admission policies, are detrimental to the policies aimed at integrating legal immigrants, and place migrants in a vulnerable situation." ●



(Photo: Denise Noone, NEWTEC Women's Training and Education Centre, London/Member of the IRIS network).